

Extra Chapter - Death of Ariel

Part 1

My name is Gustav.

Situated in a dark corner of the Asura Capital City Ars is my savvy little private investigator office.

Modestly decorated, it dares to boast "nothing in Asura goes amiss here."

That kind of pronouncement is a conceit of mine.

One day, this rumor passed my ears.

"Second Princess Ariel-sama was assassinated on the way to Ranoa Magic University, perpetrator unknown."

The savvy I drew in the blanks, that Ariel's enemy, First Prince Grewell, had spread this rumor.

Ariel enjoys enormous popularity within the capital, with a pompous farewell ceremony as cover, quietly slipped out of the city.

Princess Ariel's convoy numbered 17 heads in all, too few a person of her station. But amongst them were the famed young knight Luke Notus Greyrat and the reputedly powerful "Silent Fitts". As such even my intelligence network failed to penetrate them.

Rumors of Ariel's fall in their political struggle had spread in the city.

Among the various rumors, one stood out.

That the real Ariel was assassinated spread like wildfire.

If only we had some eye witness account, but the details are vague. The source is unknown.

Trustworthiness is low. With how fast it spread, someone had obviously been manipulating in the background.

As such, being a private investigator, I was naturally inclined to dig for the truth. But I'd rather not be caught with the truth by some scheming palace nobles.

Considering that, I was going to just pretend I know nothing, and let it slide.

But after making that decision, someone paid me a visit soon after the spread of the rumor.

Being a savvy investigator, I naturally knew who it was.

Head of Ariel Faction, Philemon Notus Greyrat's underlying, one responsible for intelligence.

Pseudonyms and disguises were both useless against me.

Initially he was accusatory and overbearing. But once I exposed who he was, he was much more respectful with the request.

"Determine whether Princess Ariel was alive."

I was shocked by what I just heard.

Even her own faction lost contact with Ariel, and her safety unknown.

That, the savvy me, couldn't fathom.

Even though I had already decided to not investigate this... I nevertheless accepted the request.

Why?

Of course, the generous reward...

Part 2

To collect intel, I followed Ariel's trail from its start.

After Princess Ariel left the capital, she headed immediately North.

North of Asura Kingdom. Use study aboard at Magic University as a feint, but instead flee elsewhere... was not the case.

As I followed the breadcrumbs, I learned Ariel had been hounded.

The presence of black clothed gangs both before and after Ariel's convoy.

By the time they reached the next city, her escorts had decreased in number.

But that was within expectation.

If the journey was safe, Ariel's people won't be so worried to check on the princess' safety in the first place.

Ariel's guards fell one by one, but they continued northwards.

By the time they had arrived at Asura Kingdom's northern checkpoint, only ten escorts had remained.

Asura Kingdom's northern border.

A narrow valley known was the Red Dragon Upper Jaw, its southern edge flanked by densely covered forests.

Finally, I got my hands on a very convincing testimony.

He claimed to remember vividly the moment when Ariel arrived at the border checkpoint.

Testimony of Exit Managing Officer Justin Smiley

That day, my mood was sour.

More sour than usual.

I was just thinking about how this wasn't the right job for me.

Em? My job?

Eh, just boring work.

Checking the passport of people leaving the country to evaluate whether they need closer scrutiny. Mostly merchant doing business with the North, the rest largely adventurers and mercenaries.

The merchant usually had passports already, and the adventurers could exchange their adventurer licenses for passports.

Mercenary and traveler passports require further verification, but that's not part of my job.

Another managing officer handles that. So long as they're not wanted criminals, they usually pass.

Comparatively, the entry checkpoint was much stricter.

Identifying fake passports that criminals use was part of the job, but fighting them wasn't. I left the soldiers to handle that.

Like I said, so long they hadn't done anything too bad, exit passports were a simple affair. Only criminals won't receive them. Besides, wanted criminals would skip the checkpoint and use a smuggling route instead.

Intercepting smuggling organizations and breaking their route were also my job description.

But honestly, it's kind of a boring and meaningless job.

No chance for commendations no matter how hard I work, only to just quietly waste away. Thinking that I was already looking for another job.

The soldiers I work with, I didn't have a good relationship with them.

I treated them like idiots, and they thought me a sap, the typical dysfunction between rank and file.

Honestly, as a royal academy graduate, I thought I deserved better than languishing in the border.

Then Princess Ariel arrived... it was just passed noon.

In a double-wide luxury horse carriage, surrounded by seven escorts.

Including the driver and probable two passengers, they numbered ten in total.

Originally, I thought it was a mere noble sightseeing.

But here was home, and there was foreign soil and a great wild north of snow and dangerous magical beasts.

Not like no nobles ever went North before, but they usually would have a whole baggage train - with at least two, three wagons long and a couple dozen escorts.

High ranked adventurers could make do with less, since they're pretty tough folks. This group on the other hand looked awfully fragile, weakly guarded, staffed by folks unused to travel.

Why would they come to the border?

Maybe some high ranked minister finally came for a secret inspection?

That thought got me all worked up.

"Passport, please."

"Oh."

The one that responded was the young man leading the group.

A good looking man, even with the heavy fatigue on his face and dark circles under his eyes.

Right then I felt something off.

But the passport looked legit, a authentic passport issued by Asura Kingdom. Issued to the Notus Family, nothing wrong with it.

Normally, I'd just let them pass right then.

But nevertheless something felt off, and I recognized these faces.

Now I thought about it, He's Ariel's Guardian Knight, Luke Notus Greyrat. I didn't realize it at first, since I hadn't seen him in a while.

I only stopped them out of habit.

Since the faces I make an effort to remember were generally criminals.

"Excuse me, may I inquire whom might be in the carriage?"

Hearing those words, the guards on duty blocked the checkpoint exit.

No matter how poor our relationship, we still got a job to do.

In response, Luke's group all turned rather anxious.

I see, so they do have a wanted man with them. I put on a front, but the wary youth shook his head.

"For her own reason, the person in the carriage prefers not to make an appearance."

Of course I won't let that pass.

I put on a troubled expression in order to encourage him to reconsider, and the youth's face twisted from agony.

The others... were well traveled. They're solemn, their hands on their sword scabbards by their waist. Their motions were well practiced and battle tested.

But most terrifying among them was the white-haired young man near the back.

Even with a beginner's wand wielded, he stood like a battle-hardened warrior, without any weak points to exploit, terrible to behold.

Must the rumored "Silent Fitts". Never in my life had I seen a kid that could a chill down my spine.

From experience, I knew that in a fight like this, we won't survive without casualties. Should I rush to order the soldiers to surround and arrest them? Or maybe I should...

In my confusion, a voice rang from the carriage.

"Fitts, stop at once."

That voice, a voice that could impregnate my ear.

A mesmerizing voice.

One I heard only once before, yet it already carved itself deep in my memory.

Ten years ago, during my graduation ceremony at the capital, the valedictorian speech. Only once, but I could never forget it. An unforgettable voice.

A voice that made everyone present regretted not being more diligent in their studies.

"Don't trouble them for merely performing their duties."

When the carriage door opened, I felt my whole body shaken, stirred.

That figure, one I could never forget.

During the graduation ceremony, a little princess was in attendance as honored guest.

A figure I'd pledge my allegiance to, one the whole nation would swear allegiance to, the very pride of a nation. That kind of emotion she inspired from me.

An unforgettable sight.

"E-excuse my insolence."

That beautiful princess with golden hair was even more dazzling up close. Immediately I couldn't help myself but kneel.

Without a doubt, the Asura Kingdom Second Princess, Ariel Anemoi Asura.

Always happy to bless public events with her presence, capital city's favorite royal.

Among the soldiers, many had seen her from afar, but even among them it was the first time meeting her up close.

"You may rise. As I had no urgent business with the border patrol, such salute is unnecessary"

While saying that, the princess stepped down from her carriage.

The surrounding soldiers also kneeled like I did.

As the Princess said, unless it was a special occasion, soldiers at the border were absolved from kneeling at royalties.

I don't know why that was, but that was decided long ago.

The truth is, I shouldn't kneeled, nor had the soldiers ever before.

Even so, no one would be punished.

Just because it wasn't required, didn't mean it was outright banned. We would always kneel for the princess.

It would just feel odd otherwise.

"P-Princess Ariel-sama... I-I'm obligated to ask... Why had you come to the border with so few escorts?"

"What? Haven't you heard?"

Of course I knew the reason.

Wracking my brain for the answer, I suddenly recall something from a month ago.

Obviously, I wasn't this border station's highest ranked officer, nor was my immediate superior. Instead, he was an noble working as mayor in a nearby city.

He won't even come by once a month, unless for some errands or issuing orders.

His last order arrived suddenly.

"If some high aristocrats pass by in a few months, stop them."

When I heard a high aristocrat, I figure it'd be a long baggage chain some ten wagons long.

So it didn't come to mind when Ariel arrived.

"A high aristocrat will pass..."

"And then?"

Her question quickly jogged my memory.

Indeed, he said a high aristocrat.

"I'm afraid that high aristocrat would try to cross the border and flee to the North. Do not let them pass, hold up them at a border hotel for a few days."

do not pass, held them.

In other words, Princess Ariel will die here.

This wasn't the first time an order like this came down from above.

Whenever some noble tried to escape through here, an order like this would come down.

If the order was "pass", the noble would pass safely and flee to the north. If the order was "do not pass", the noble would mysteriously disappear inside the border forest.

I may be born in the capital, but I'm a mere civilian.

Far away from the political strife between noble factions.

Yet even I'm aware how dirty was palace intrigues amongst palace nobles.

Whether the hit was ordered for money or opportunism, I did not know.

Just that the target belonged to a different political faction than my boss.

Thus, this beautiful princess, after losing to my boss' faction, attempted to flee northwards, that's my deduction.

"..."

"Well, answer me."

I considered the situation.

If I just said with a smile, "Nothing, mere pleasantries. Unfortunately, this passport is incomplete and requires further verification. Please return tomorrow." It would be easy, and not a first for me. Even locking those up would be piece of cake.

But the question of righteousness flooded my mind..

For the good of the country was a phrase that never crossed my lips.

Not once did I ever think to do good "for the nation."

But that day, I really thought of that.

That day, the first time I witnessed Princess Ariel, on my graduation.

That day I really thought "the one I would serve, the pride of our nation."

That thought, mixed with the knowledge of threat to the young princess' life. I quickly came to a conclusion.

I'm no longer lost.

"I received an order to block a high aristocrat from leaving, and hold them at a nearby hotel for a few days."

The moment I said those words, the mood among the escorts instantly shifted.

Only Princess Ariel calmly asked.

"I see, then, what do you plan to do?"

"... Nothing."

"You refuse to perform in your duty? Disobeying a direct order, do you not know the price of disobedience is beheading?"

Seeing Princess Ariel's imposing response, I smiled.

"That order never informed me who this "high aristocrat" was, but surely he won't be fleeing the country on a shabby carriage with so few escorts."

"I see."

"Before my eyes is an unknown but impressively looking little girl. Little miss, what is your name again?"

Hearing these words, Princess Ariel smiled cheerfully.

Perhaps she was bemused for playing into the current farce.

"Ariel Canars, at your service, daughter of a low noble."

"Well then, Miss Ariel Canars, why are you heading North?"

"To study abroad at Magic University."

"Really? Then the passport is fine, I wish you a safe and happy journey."

"Thank you very much."

Princess Ariel, after taking a bow, inappropriate for a royal, returned to her horse carriage.

The driver started the cart moving again, her dazed escorts also followed suit.

"Okay, next..."

As I said that, I noticed something with my eyes.

Countless pairs of eyes from every soldier stationed glaring squarely at my office.

I desperately wanted to get away.

All of them were career soldiers. Unlike me, the capital trained them only to follow orders, not to think.

They may be my subordinates, but we're still different departments.

It's quite possible that they also received direct orders to "stop Princess Ariel".

The punishment for disobeying the order would fall to them as well.

They probably never imagine this Second Princess Ariel as head of a political faction.

But to my boss, she might the most important enemy that mustn't escape. She could very well took with her some unspeakable secrets.

If she was to escape, it wouldn't be surprised if we're all hanged.

I have decided, if this was exposed, I'll take the fall for it.

As I made my resolve, one among the soldiers slowly approached me.

His wide shoulders were probably three times of mine, the soldiers' captain.

He lifted his frying pan sized hang and gave me a nice pat.

Bracing for crushing bones, but it didn't hurt at all. The impact merely made I take a step backwards.

"Well done."

As the captain said that, all the soldiers around the office raised their fists.

Some even whistled.

Afterwards I learned that all the soldiers on this border control were Princess Ariel Faction.

Princess Ariel, they all remember her from their graduation ceremony.

Even though they mostly could only wave from afar, just like me. This outcome was easy for them to accept.

"Middle Officer Smiley! We all thought we would rot in this border, but something good finally happened! Everyone, would you agree?"

"Yeah!"

"Let's head to the tavern, I'm buying the rounds!"

The captain patted me on the back, and my mood turned unusually good.

I think my tomorrow would be a whole lot different with them.

Even though I don't comingle with royalties, I don't look for company among roughnecks either.

But that was then.

These people were just like me, casted away at the border. They're just doing the job after given a rotten order.

Realizing that... it somehow made me take a little more pride of my work.

Afterwards, my relationship with the soldiers improved significantly, and the day to day work turned less dreary.

This was all thanks to the Princess Ariel.

Once passed the border, she should be safe.

He went on to talk obsessively about Princess Ariel, so rest omitted...

Part 3

And so on.

His praises for Princess Ariel gone on and on, although interesting, wasn't really what I was here for.

"The black clothed gang that was pursuing Princess Ariel, did they passed through the border also?"

"Pursuers..? No."

"R-really?"

"Well, there was a suspicious group with dubious identification that passed the border some three days before Princess Ariel. I only heard about that afterwards."

I see, so the pursuers had already set up an ambush for the princess beforehand.

"If I knew it then, I'd warn her... but now, all I could do is pray for the Princess' safety."

"I see, thank you."

I guess the officer could not confirm or deny the rumor of Ariel's death.

But that was merely what the Capital rumored.

I still cannot determine whether Ariel was alive or dead.

I must continue the work collecting intel.

With what information available to me currently, I cannot call the job done.

Then I went on to check with other officers and soldiers, as well as investigate the hotel and border checkpoints.

What happened to Ariel afterwards?

Did she pass through the forest safely or not, or was she murdered as rumored?

Searching for intel, I went from hotel to hotel.

The savvy I finally found a young merchant with the information.

Merchant Bruno's testimony

That day, I was traveling down the road toward Asura Kingdom, with my merchandise per usual.

Red Dragon Upper Lip, crossing over Dragon's Beard... Huh? Ah, over there a gang of people north of the forest, yelling at something.

What merchandise I brought..? The only thing worth importing from the North, fur.

How many of us? Just one.

Escorts? Of course none. Do I look wealthy to you?

But I have confidence in my own strength, since I was trained at the Holyland of the Sword.

Oh, where was I...?

Oh, right, as we're passing the Dragon's Beard.

With Robinson as my companion. Eh? Where's Robinson? In the stable. Robinson is my donkey.

Anyways, I was walking with him.

Since business had gone smoothly, I was in a good mood. I had almost saved enough for a new wagon.

One that even a donkey could pull. With that the goods I can ship at once would greatly increase.

But in the road ahead, there's sound of swords clashing.

And the wind carried with it a burning smell.

Since I'm a traveling merchant, I'm ever vigilant of trouble like that.

Avoiding danger is job number one.

Even so, there's only one path, nor would I turn back. So Robinson and I dived into the forest to force our way around.

The smart move would be leaving the donkey behind, but I value my companion. I won't leave him behind, even if a magical beast attacked.

Robinson and I tried to keep our advance hidden.

The clatter of swords grew louder, and I could begin to hear shouting. Even though Robinson was afraid, after spending so many difficult years with me together, it still advanced despite its whimpering and unease.

What? Stop setting the scene and get on with it?

Pssh, busybodies... anyways.

So here's the deal, what I saw a horse carriage, not a big one. At most, it seats three, including the driver. One horse should be able to pull it alone, but this one had two. Maybe by regulation...? Why so much detail? Because I was wagon shopping. I asked the wagon merchant what size horse carriage could a donkey pull... okay, okay, I get it, you don't have to look so terrifying so sudden. Fine, I'll stop derailing myself.

I understood the instant I saw it, the carriage was under attack.

Why? Because it fell to its side, and those I presumed its escorts were engaging in desperate battle against a black clothed gang.

Seven black clothed and four escorts standing. They're guards for the carriage, or maybe simple followers? Two more had already fallen to the ground. Near the horse carriage were four more girls quivering, I'm afraid they're the ones being protected.

Regardless, the black clothed gang held the advantage.

But among the fallen were plenty black clothed ones as well.

The ground was littered with dozens of their bodies.

When I saw it, I was shocked, what idiots would plan an attack with so many casualties?

But I was wrong.

When I looked closely, the black clothed gangs didn't move like novices.

Or rather, they seem better trained than the guards. One vs one, the black clothed gang wouldn't be losing so badly.

Eh? Why did I stop?

As I was saying, don't judge me by my appearance, but I have confidence in my strength. I can tell by watching their strength and weaknesses.

That's why, curiosity got the better of me and I stopped to watch.

Only one among the escorts was moving gracefully.

A white-haired young man, wielding a rookie magic wand.

He was on another level.

In the Holyland of Swords, there're Sword Saints and Sword Kings with reaction times far beyond us mere mortals.

From that experience, I instantly could tell that he was an individual of excellent judgment.

When an ally fell in trouble, he'll instantly fire off magic to aid him.

Even so, keeping his magic capacity in reserve, he took care to use only elementary magic.

Calling it a miracle assist wouldn't be far from the truth.

Those movements were well practiced.

I couldn't hear any incantation from my position, so perhaps he knew chantless magic.

A chantless magician... what a remarkable thing to witness.

Even so.

I'm afraid the black clothed gang was also battle-tested, and as such took down many of his allies.

Moreover, all the guards left standing were exhausted.

From my evaluation, if another gets taken out, defeat would be imminent.

It was that kind of atmosphere.

But the black clothed gang was surprisingly cautious.

They suddenly switched tactics, probably using a predetermined cue, but I didn't spot what it was.

The three sword wielding guards did not react in time.

Only the white haired youth did.

With incredible focus, he unleashed an area effect magic and sent two to their deaths.

The black clothed gang split up, with two rushed at the white haired youth, and the remaining three toward the carriage.

In that instant, their defensive parameter was broken, but the white haired youth remained unwaver.

Rather than focusing on the two rushing at him, he instead pointed his wand at those focusing on the girls. Impressive, that he could put their safety above his own.

All these happened simultaneously the next moment.

First, the white-haired youth unleashed magic, took down two of the three there.

Then he dodged out of the path of those charging at him.

Those two got entangled in a fight with two guards.

The final black clothed gang member swung at the head of one of the quivering girls.

In that instant, the last guard stabbed the black clothed person from behind.

With pride, the last black clothed person lifted up the severed head, and died.

I'm afraid these guards were tasked with protecting with some noble's daughter.

The remaining five were stunned.

Their companion dead, the one they're tasked to protect, it was only natural for them to be.

Once I confirmed the resolution, I left the scene.

Won't' be fun to hang around with magic beasts sniffing at the scent of bloodbath, nor do I want to be swamped by requests.

With Robinson in tow, we left....

Part 4

After meeting with the merchant, I collated his testimony with the managing officer's. After peacefully passing through the border, the Princess Ariel was ambushed in the forest and died in a desperate battle to her pursuers.

The rumors Ariel Faction had feared the most came true, Ariel had died.

But some mysteries remained.

What of the surviving guards?

At least five survived.

Luke Notus Greyrat was unknown, but at least "Silent Fitts" had survived.

Despite being so conspicuous, yet I haven't heard of his return to the capital.

Perhaps he returned through a route I'm unaware of, but the fact that they had passed the border was certain.

Assuming no other intel forthcoming, they may headed north anyways.

Quite possible. With their mission to protect the princess failed, they may fled to avoid prosecution.

I could understand why they would flee from the country and continued north instead...

Unfortunately, even though my private investigator office's slogan was "nothing in Asura goes amiss here."

I lacked sources outside of Asura.

Besides, my investigation was the whereabouts of Second Princess Ariel.

Not her guards.

And I'd rather not cross the border.

The merchant brought some nice beer from the North, so I might as well have

a few.

Part 5

After reporting on my findings, Ariel Faction was in tears.

The normally imposing intel officer, getting so emotional over the news, was refreshing to see.

Anyways, I received my payments, my job was done.

Seeing his reaction, I should just take my payment and buy some good beer and dinner to avoid souring my mood.

With that thought, I took my beer jug and head to the tavern.

After sat myself at my favorite seat, I placed my order. This is my permanent spot where I could observe the whole tavern.

Sitting here and listening in on the conversations about the tavern was also one of my skills.

This skill let me in at all sorts of secrets, one I have made a living off of.

"Say, I heard rumors recently that the princess died. Did you?"

"Em, you believe that?"

"No, I don't want to, but..."

Hearing the topic at hand, I turned my head.

A strong man and one past his prime, drinking face to face.

A couple of pawns unknown to the truth. That thought made me felt pretty good about myself. Working in intelligence had its benefits.

"I work at the border."

"You can stop, I know where uncle worked at. You don't need to tell me again about finally getting a vacation after twenty years."

"Hey, what do you know? But do you know what my job at the border was?"

"That I don't."

The topic changed, and I soon lost my interest.

My order had arrived. It's enough, I done my job. My next mission is a place with good drinks.

"The watchtower."

My focus returned to him once more.

"Seating at the top of the tower and observing the far exit of the forest with a far-seeing magic tool, that's my job."

"Oh?"

"So when I heard that Princess Ariel crossed the border from the soldiers. I was among those who want a good look at the princess, so I checked her out with the tool."

"Well? What did you see?"

"Ah, without a doubt, I saw Ariel-sama."

How suspicious.

Either this soldier was lying, or the merchant was.

No, that's not right. The merchant could simply be mistaken, and the girl murdered wasn't Princess Ariel.

Ariel was royalty, and I heard of rumors of them using performer's magic tools to escape ambushes.

In other words, in a hurry, I misinterpreted the evidence.

And gave client false intel.

No good. I have a duty to truthfully report what I just heard...

"... Sorry for the wait."

But right then my order had arrived.

In front of me was a hot meal and beer, uncommon even in the capital.

"Forget it."

I sat back down.

If she really survived and study abroad at Magic University, then the truth will spread around the world.

Returning my pad would certainly suck, maybe I should leave the capital for a while. To think soldiers on the watchtower would confirm sighting of Princess Ariel... well well, even the savvy me didn't think of that.

The investigation office provided false intelligence.

Because of that, Ariel Faction leader Philemon Notus Greyrat had to make a difficult choice, and end up cornered... but that was a story of much later time.

Translator's Notes and References